

The Salathé Wall Solo

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WITH so much history and poppycock tales about the Salathé Wall, a solo of it might seem outrageous and desperate. But it wasn't that way at all. Climbing stories and the climbing imagination in their new hyperactivity and peculiar neediness brusquely race past the humble realities of rest places, large ledges, good protection and fun climbing, or in the "professional" or hardman arena, past climbing itself. When this modern trend, these fantasies, and gossip are contained in a little Yosemite Valley campground, covetousness and absurd slickness develop; an opaque fog gathers while the mud begins to form. It is no one's fault, this mud, but yours or mine if we sling it. So who, in 1972, can tell the way back or out to the clear and simple privacy of one's own climbing and love for the granite experience? Personal hardness or cynical pressure can not render crystalline and geologic an indefinite smog of feckless rumor and struggle. The Valley climber is both the victor and victim of his brothers and an international theater of acclaim. A small bay of confusion and carefully silent jealousy often form behind him as he becomes a part of that international theater and the first ascents prayer wheel. To pay attention to this reaction is to give it currency, and to open oneself to it, a grave injustice to one's passion. So we have to ignore everything but what is up there: one is always more skilled than almost anyone else wants one to be. Push off from all the articles, guides, ratings, reputations, fads, teachers, and even friends; in good sense do what ever you will. Thus my ascents or yours, as well as this article, are actually no one's business, especially since it seems inevitable that integrity and inspiration becomes identified nowadays in cheap dramatic terms with any problems (real or fabricated) to which my climbing or yours might be imagined by others as a kind of answer.

What is the moment when a climber or anyone steps out of his boring routine, risking his satisfaction to an ominous future and possible failure? I was in better shape than ever; I was prepared for intense climbing. And for me, it was inevitable that somehow I would have to attempt for better or for worse a resolution of the desire I had to develop friendship of solid and true character within thorny Camp Four and thus to *ratify* climbing as a sufficiently *rich* life style. And it was in the cards that in searching for respect, understanding and meaning there that I would attempt first a rejection of the arena and then maybe its reconciliation. The Salathé Wall done solo would catch it off guard,

both kick it in the teeth and then bring that motley crew's respect, primitive as it might be. But also I, even more unrealistically, hoped for their love.

Beyond this basically petty and irrelevant realm of social pressures, there remained the intense and I suppose primordial desire to contact on however a temporary or make-believe basis an original human experience of persistent self-control and critical awareness that in turn leads to freedom and the elation or revelation of one's survival, of one's lifehood and lust. This climb, which I had secretly, boyishly, thought of for five years was in complete disjunction with my experience. Since I had been basically a free climber for eight years, Yosemite's big walls were not familiar to me. I had failed on several attempts of them, one a horror-filled solo, of Quarter Dome, North Face, and was quite awed by El Cap in particular. So with many needs and no formal credentials I inspected this "Salathé Wall" of my fancies. But unlike other previous times, I examined the entire route spending hours on features of the pitches. I was bent on determining if the Salathé could be done solo; I knew this was not to be assumed. It was an ancient place; I knew it by the sidelighting higher on the wall: orange dark red, and yellow ripples and horns visible half a mile below; rock that must have been above and untouched by more recent glaciation, unshorn, wilder than the correct stiff smoothness lower down. This was a place to hold me for awhile in my fastlike resolutions.

Moderate low-angle slab climbing, unexposed at the start and I am slowly eased into graver consequences and more dramatic views. Worried that the heat, in spite of steady breezes might sabotage my whole effort, I carry extra water and heavy cans of fruit: I want the wall. But the expense is to my hands: soreness I have never known develops as the first day passes and nearly thwarts my entire adventure as I awakened the next morning to bloated fingers and burning skin; all this damned hauling. If only one could just climb — climb without bags, water, packs, shoes, rurps, ropes, porters, maps, oxygen, and radios — merely as an incandescent unfettered being given to ascension and completely in control. But if everything were in control, ascension, upwardness, climbing, would not have the trembling impact it has. Life without death, eternity, might be worse than life after death and I am laughing. After all, soloing, save from being away from other climbers, seems to be no step towards freedom in climbing. God, that prusik knot and Jumar can drive me frantic sometimes. I lower myself laboriously down the line to the normally easy pendulum into Hollow Flake Crack. I attempt the pendulum; I am short. I take slack, prying loose the flesh-eating Jumar's bite on the rope and the prusik knot's death grip below it. I try penduluming again: I am short again. Again and *again*. Well it's only the second day, but no one would believe it took me five times to get that crack, I think, as I cranked off the heel and toe jams up to Hollow Flake Ledge. Sleeping here will be weird: it's

right in the line of recent rockfalls! Worrying will do nothing, so I fix one pitch at dusk.

Days are passing and the wall is falling slowly away. My anxiety does not bubble off in joy but instead my climbing gets better, more swift; the Jümar-prusik self-belaying is executed more methodically and seems to become a skill in itself. The bivouac spots, the nesting places I make up this wall are more meaningful than most of the climbing I am doing. Reaching the end of the day and a place to take stock of the situation, to lie up against the wall childlike and tired. To wake to another blue morning, another day within days on this wall: this many days alone. *Would this solitude be unbearable without El Cap?*

If one needs people, one wouldn't be here. In fact a climber is by virtue of his respect for life and safety philosophically "for himself" on any climb, and often afterwards too, sadly. "Am I slipping?"; "Am I tired?"; "Is my foot properly placed?": all questions concerning minute conditions of oneself and the rock, and all these are logically, necessarily *prior* to those between partners, even in emergency. But I have no partner and it seems emotionally simpler this way at least up to now.

From Hollow Flake Ledge the wall steepens quickly to vertical or more. The Ear, a thick flake probably fifty feet through with a moderate but exposed bomb-bay chimney, and scanty protection challenges me now three leads into the day. Facing out with back against the wall, I nervously work along horizontally. Each move relaxes me more though, and, my God, there are giant holds in here! Coming around the corner is getting to be a problem . . . go slower. Fine, I am up, but now it's really steep. A giant 150-foot aid lead just above will be time-consuming and I've got to finish before night or I'll be doing that short 5.9 jam crack in the dark to dinner and sleep in the Alcove. This aid lead is the first of many other steep ones like it but because it's the first, it's the worst. Exposure, strenuousness, anxiety about time, and fear grip me as thankfully they will not again.

Inside the deep Alcove, I lie, eating and drinking everything I can afford to, the plan being for two more bivouacs. Is it the fourth of July? A mad string of car lights is daubing along the Valley floor in the warm night air.

These last days. I am climbing; I am pushing upward, rising in a cloud of new life; no one is up here; fifteen-foot roofs and 200-foot overhanging headwalls; not a soul is up here; I am alone. I say, "I am climbing the Salathé Wall . . . solo"; it means *nothing* because I am there: a climbing being, a simple force, nothing more and this is all really that should ever be important to us. A certain mind, two strong hands: I kind of love myself up here as the blond world of Yosemite granite holds me, but with no passion, none of its own. Much as any surfer feels that he has the voice of the wave, I sense having the body of this mountain: mineralized and transfigured into a 3000-foot wall, a

man of granite a half-mile-high and a spirit as arid and vast. The awareness and critical attention I have to pay El Cap can invert to a passivity: I have committed myself to it; whatever it offers, I must take; whatever it is, I am. But at the same time I know and admit the real separation between us. The splintered wall, the pillow head of man.

Night is coming; I must reach Thank God Ledge. But now dark is here and I haven't a chance. A remaining headlamp lead up the 70-foot pitch of aid (is it really that short?) attracts me less than rest and a last radical fling of sleeping in a two point hammock strung from a single vertical crack slicing up the Headwall now over 2700 feet above the talus. My sleep comes and goes, drifting slowly through the night. I am finding peace, for tomorrow will be the end; only several leads remain but I know the last pitch could be a terrible solo problem

The last day is the same warm fair summer day that all the others were. I relishingly climb on, untangling the incredible mess of equipment I made in my fatigue last night wanting quick release to sleep and reverie. Several mixed pitches and I've arrived at the low-angle apron below the summit lead, a short nailup to an overhanging narrowing squeeze crack that becomes hand jams. With greater effort than anywhere below (God, this is 5.10!!) and a disturbing risk due to slack paid out in advance, these last feet are gained, and after rappelling, cleaning and hauling, the whole adventure has suddenly ended. Two laughing camp friends have come to greet me and help me off with all this gear. I can't recognize them . . . they are so dark and ordinary expressions on their faces seem as blank contortions. Well I know it's them . . . a rock is thrown just missing my head.

